

## **The Recognition of Emotional Abuse: Adolescents' Responses to Warning Signs in Romantic Relationships**

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### **Abstract**

Emotional abuse in relationships is widespread and can have serious detrimental effects on subsequent functioning. Despite this, and despite the knowledge that adolescents aged 16-19 are most likely to fall victim to abuse in romantic relationships when compared to older age groups, research surrounding warning signs of abuse and adolescents' responses to them has been lacking. This study explored adolescents' attitudes towards, and responses to, warning signs of emotional abuse. Males and females aged 16-19 ( $N = 171$ ) from two high schools and one University completed a purpose-designed questionnaire containing 20 statements of warning sign behaviours. They then answered questions measuring perceived acceptability of these behaviours and proposed responses to them. Warning signs were separated into four domains: denigration, personal degradation, public degradation, and verbal aggression. As expected participants on average proposed passive or vague responses to warning signs in all four domains. Warning sign behaviours that involved personal degradation were perceived to be the least acceptable of all behaviours, but even 'risk aware' individuals still lacked knowledge of effective responses to warning signs. Females perceived warning sign behaviours to be the least acceptable and proposed the most assertive responses. However the response protectiveness effect was reversed in those aged 19, with females proposing the least assertive responses. Although adolescents are aware of what constitutes unacceptable relationship behaviours, they still lack knowledge of the appropriate ways to respond to warning signs in order to discourage future abusive relationship behaviours. The implications of these findings for interventions and practical training for adolescents to prevent abuse are discussed.

**Keywords.** Adolescents; Dating violence; Intimate Partner Violence; Perceptions of domestic violence; Psychological abuse; Youth violence.

### **The Problem of Emotional Abuse**

The Crime Survey for England and Wales has consistently found that 16-19 year olds are the group most likely to suffer abuse at the hands of a romantic partner, and that 40% of all domestic abuse victims have experienced the abuse since the age of 16 (Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2017). Research into abuse has undoubtedly expanded throughout the years, increasing our understanding of the phenomenon. However, the majority still tends to focus on the physical side when this is only one facet of the problem; domestic abuse occurs in a multiplicity of relationships and encompasses many different forms of maltreatment. In 2015, the UK Government changed its definition of domestic violence to include emotional abuse, comprising coercive and controlling behaviour that stops short of physical abuse. This kind of emotional abuse carries a maximum sentence of five years imprisonment and now includes the maltreatment of young people under the age of 18 (Home Office, 2015). Despite this, emotional abuse still lacks the political and public profile of physical and sexual abuse (Glaser, 2002; Outlaw, 2009). This may be because it was not recognised as a separate form of maltreatment until the last few decades, or, it may relate to definitional problems (Stoltenborgh, Bakermans-kranenburg, Alink & Van Ijzendoorn, 2012). The current study therefore focussed on the identification of, and response to, warning signs of emotional abuse by adolescents, and below we review the literature relating to these areas. By way of context, we first discuss the prevalence of dating violence and abuse according to victimisation surveys.

### **The Prevalence of Adolescent Dating Violence**

Emotional abuse is reported as frequently taking place in adolescent romantic relationships (ONS, 2017). Healthy adolescent romantic relationships have been linked to positive

outcomes including higher self-esteem, skill building for long-term partnership, and a sense of social competence (Fisher, 2016). However, a recent meta-analysis of 101 studies on the prevalence of teen dating violence found that a considerable portion of adolescents are likely to fall victim to some form of violence, with physical violence ranging from 1-61% (Wincentak, Connolly & Card, 2017). An international review of European and North American studies found rates of emotional/psychological abuse in teen dating relationships ranging from 17-88% (Leen et al., 2013).

This emotional and psychological abuse is the most frequent form of dating victimisation reported by high school students, with girls more likely to report victimisation than boys (Hebert, Blais & Lavoie, 2017). In a study carried out by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) investigating the frequency, nature and dynamics of different forms of teen dating violence, 72% of girls and 51% of boys reported some form of emotional partner violence, the majority reporting being victim to more than one form (Barter, McCarry, Berridge & Evans, 2009). Furthermore, Barter et al. (2009) found that 59% of girls and 50% of boys admitted to instigating emotional abuse, making it the most prevalent form of partner abuse used by young people. These emotionally abusive and controlling behaviours by adolescents can also predict future patterns of dyadic relationship violence (O’Leary & Smith-Slep, 2003; Smith, White & Holland, 2003), and can be among the most robust predictors of physical violence (Follingstad, Bradley, Helff, & Lauglin, 2002; Molitor, 1995).

### **Defining Emotional and Relationship Abuse**

The field has experienced difficulties in defining concepts and establishing certain thresholds for any emotionally abusive or neglectful behaviours (O’Hagan, 1993). There has been much debate about whether the definition should refer to the consequences for the victim or the behaviour itself, as well as whether evidence is needed for it to be recognised

(Glaser, 2002). One problem is that emotional abuse tends to imply sustained patterns of maladaptive interactions, whereas physical or sexual abuse can be limited to a single isolated incident (Glaser, 2002). Follingstad and DeHart (2000) summarised multiple schemas of emotional abuse and concluded that most of these include behaviours which result in humiliation, rejection, degradation, exploitation, and threats. More recently, Black et al. (2011) defined emotional abuse as including coercive control and expressive aggression such as insults, humiliation, and name calling.

Whereas physical abuse typically occurs during a more easily definable act of conflict, emotional abuse can often be disguised as an expression of love or humour, and is not always perceived as being offensive when it occurs (Keashly, 2001). Indeed, emotional abuse may take many forms, from being obvious or subtle, to a behaviour that is neglected or enacted (Smullens, 2010). Further issues with defining emotional abuse arise because those proposed are often so loose and broad that they fail to distinguish emotional abuse from all other forms. For example Arias and Pape's (1999) definition includes acts that symbolically hurt another, or the use of hurtful threats, and these acts can be verbal or non-verbal.

Although defining emotional abuse is difficult, there seems to be a general consensus as to what constitutes emotionally abusive behaviour. For example, Burnett (1993) found that 381 citizens and 452 social workers identified the same nine descriptions of adult behaviours towards children as psychological/emotional abuse. Similarly, there was an 80% agreement among mental health professionals and parents on the definition of 10 categories of verbal behaviour being never acceptable (Schaefer, 1997).

The UK Government defines domestic abuse as being any incident of coercive, controlling, threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between those who are or have been intimate partners or family members, and are aged at least 16 (Home Office, 2012). Building on this definition and that proposed and used by Murphy and Smith (2010), in the current

study relationship abuse was defined as behaviour towards a partner during a consensual romantic relationship that results in emotional harm. In the context of the current study, emotional harm refers to outcomes of reduced confidence and self-esteem, wariness, helplessness, self-doubt, humiliation and guilt.

### **The Recognition of Abuse**

The recognition of physical abuse by professionals, such as general practitioners and nurses, has been thoroughly researched. For example, nurses are much less confident and knowledgeable about recognising emotional abuse than physical abuse because of a lack of knowledge of the signs and symptoms (Fraser, Matthews, Walsh, Chen & Dunne, 2010). However, there is much less research on the ability of lay people to recognise the signs of abuse. In existing research, the ability to recognise emotional abuse is reduced relative to the recognition of physical abuse (Korbin, 2000). Korbin (2000) asked parents to generate lists of behaviours that they would define as abuse and neglect, and only 42% listed emotional and verbal maltreatment as abuse. These results suggest that lay people may have more difficulty in recognising the lesser documented forms of abuse, and highlights that any community interventions aimed at preventing abuse and maltreatment should first have a very clear understanding of how different populations define abuse.

There is also evidence that this emotional abuse may be the most detrimental to subsequent functioning. For example, Kent, Waller and Dagnan (1999) found that emotional abuse was the only form of abuse that predicted later adulthood eating disorders, whilst Estefn, Coulter and Vandeweerd (2016) found an increased likelihood of depression for people who experience emotional abuse more than once per week. These detrimental effects highlight the importance of investigating the ways in which people *respond* to emotionally abusive behaviours, so that action can be taken to increase awareness and thus decrease the likelihood of the occurrence of emotional abuse.

### **Using Warning Signs to Recognise Emotional Abuse**

One way to recognise emotional abuse, or to recognise that there is a high probability that abuse may take place, is to look at warning signs. In the present study, warning signs are behaviours displayed by a partner that could feasibly lead to emotional harm, if not immediately, then following escalation or repeated exposure. Warning signs are generally regarded as relatively innocuous behaviours, excused by the partner or reciprocated (Few & Rosen, 2005). It is these behaviours however that are found to be normative among those most at risk of relationship violence (Wekerle & Wolfe, 1999), and can lead to lower perceived self-agency and less assertive relationship behaviours (Murphy, 2011). Despite important implications for future relationships, research into warning signs and individual responses to them has been lacking. Adolescents' relationship styles can affect their future relationships, with abuse being associated with less satisfaction in current romantic relationships (Bradbury & Shaffer, 2012), reported victimisation of men (Milletich, Kelley, Doane & Pearson, 2010), negative views of self and partner (Busby, Walker & Holman, 2010), and rates of relationship disruption (Colman & Widom, 2004). Given this association, it is important to examine adolescents' responses to warning signs of abuse.

The Cycle Theory of Violence, developed by Walker (1979), describes a dynamic process in abusive relationships. The cycle consists of three phases: a tension building phase with a rising sense of danger, the battering incident, and remorse. It is the first of these stages where warning signs appear. Their presence leads to increased tension and the victim may attempt to placate their partner and mitigate the situation. Without intervention between these phases abuse may become much more likely. To discourage future abusive behaviours it is therefore vital that individuals are aware of the ways to respond to warning signs.

In a unique study of warning signs in adolescent relationships, Murphy and Smith (2010) explored adolescent girls' responses to seven domains of warning signs of emotional and

social relationship abuse. A significant number of girls lacked awareness of the risks associated with emotional and social abuse and lacked knowledge of the appropriate ways to respond to warning signs in order to discourage them, with verbally aggressive behaviours being perceived as the most serious. However, the study primarily focused on females aged 14-18, presenting us with a female gender bias in the results. The findings also helped to promote the development of Youth targeted Relationship Abuse Prevention (YRAP) programmes, taking some of the first steps in providing evidence to inform the development of such programmes, so that individuals are better able to respond to the needs of victimised adolescents. However, although the researchers looked at the actual exposure of relationship violence experienced by adolescents, they only looked at hypothetical proposed responses, instead of what victims actually did. It is therefore difficult to ascertain whether these proposed responses would actually be implemented in real life situations, or whether the participants simply reported the way in which they would like to think they would respond, rather than what they would actually do.

The Dyadic Slippery-slope Model of Chronic Partner Abuse (Murphy, 2012) delineates mechanisms in which warning sign behaviours can evolve and intensify, resulting in abuse and serious harm. Importantly, the theory also suggests targets for education to prevent such behaviours evolving, therefore helping to achieve long-term minimisation of harm. This theory postulates that warning sign behaviours can lead to serious harm, but this is dependent upon how the partner responds; harm is more likely if they respond in a non-assertive, aggressive or comforting manner. Because exposure to such warning sign behaviours can exacerbate pre-existing personal vulnerabilities, assertive responses become rarer and less effective the further down this slippery slope relationships fall. It is therefore important for young people to be able to identify warning signs and know appropriate ways to respond, whilst the relationship is still in the phase in which assertive responses are effective.



## **The Current Study**

The above review identifies the importance of assessing whether young people of early 'dating' age can recognise abuse when it takes an emotional form, rather than the better documented physical form. Accordingly, the current study aimed to explore whether adolescents aged between 16 and 19 can recognise signs of emotional abuse in their romantic relationships, and respond in appropriate ways to discourage future abusive behaviours. The study also examined adolescents' attitudes towards warning signs, as well as the association between perceived acceptability and response protectiveness.

Three research questions underpinned the development of the study and resulting questionnaire. First, what are adolescents' attitudes towards (or perceived acceptability of) warning signs of emotional abuse? Second, how likely are adolescents to respond in ways that would be more likely to indirectly reinforce future abusive behaviours, through their responses to warning signs in each domain? Following the research conducted by Murphy and Smith (2010), we predicted that adolescents would perceive warning signs to be more acceptable than they actually are, and be unaware of the risks associated with certain warning sign behaviours, but that this would differ depending on the type of warning sign, with verbally aggressive behaviours being seen as the most unacceptable. It was also expected that adolescents would be more likely to respond in a passive manner to warning sign behaviours, therefore indirectly reinforcing future abusive behaviours. Furthermore, we predicted that adolescents would lack knowledge of appropriate ways to discourage future behaviour. We also wanted to know how gender and age impact on adolescents' attitudes towards and responses to warning signs of emotional abuse. This final research question was exploratory, since Murphy and Smith (2010) did not investigate the effect of age and gender on adolescents' attitudes and responses to warning signs, and age and gender differences in response protectiveness have not been studied before.

## Method

### Design

A within-subjects design was used to measure the effect of warning sign types on recognition and responses to emotional abuse. The independent variable was the domain to which the warning signs belonged, with each participant answering questions about statements of emotional abuse that fell into one of four domains (denigration, personal degradation, public degradation, and verbal aggression). The dependent variables were the perceived acceptability of behaviours and the responses that participants proposed they would give in that situation. Within-subject comparisons were conducted to determine whether perceived acceptability and response to behaviours varied significantly between domains, whilst bivariate correlations examined the relationship between perceived acceptability of behaviours and response scores.

### Participants

A total of 171 adolescents aged between 16 and 19 participated in the study ( $M_{age} = 17.56$ ,  $SD = .97$ ). The sample comprised UK University undergraduates from a post-1992 institution ( $n=40$ ) and high-school students in their first ( $n=55$ ) and second years ( $n=76$ ). Of the participants 41% (70/171) were in a relationship at the time of participation, and 74% (126/171) had been in a romantic relationship at least once in their lives (see Table 1). Participants were recruited through posters, online invitations through the University studies database, and verbal invitations when the first author went to visit high schools.

[Table 1 about here]

### Materials

**Warning signs questionnaire.** A 20 item questionnaire was developed for the purpose of the study, guided by research into emotional abuse.<sup>1</sup> The questionnaire and scales developed by Jacobson and Gottman (1998), Murphy and Smith (2010) and Murphy, Smith and Xenos

(2012) were looked at most closely when generating and choosing individual warning sign behaviours and their domains. The behaviours included were based upon observations during therapeutic work with young women conducted by Murphy, and each behaviour used in the current study is one that she found to occur in abusive adolescent relationships, but that is not necessarily viewed as harmful by adolescents. This anonymous questionnaire begins by asking for demographic information including age, gender, year of study, whether participants had ever been in a romantic relationship, and the length of their longest relationship. The 20 statements each related to a warning sign behaviour of emotional abuse. Two questions were asked in relation to the statements. The first “Is this acceptable behaviour in a romantic relationship?” was answered on a 5 point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Completely acceptable) to 5 (Completely unacceptable), and provided an attitudinal measure. The second question, “How would you respond if your partner did this to you?” was followed by space for participants to write an open ended response to each statement, each of which was later given a response protectiveness value ranging from 1-3, indicating how likely their response was to prevent future similar behaviours, with higher values representing more protective responses.

The 20 statements were separated into the four domains of warning signs to allow comparison. The first domain was *denigration* and included statements that involved unfairly criticizing their partner and/or partner’s family, and statements that aimed to destroy their partner’s reputation (e.g., “He/she tries to convince people that you are crazy or that there is something wrong with you”; “He/she insults your family”). The second domain of *personal degradation* included statements about humiliating/shaming their partner privately, as well as putting down their partner’s physical appearance and intelligence (e.g., “He/she tells you that you are sexually unattractive”; “He/she tells you that they’re the only person who could ever want you”). The third domain was called *public degrading* and included disparaging

comments and behaviour made in the presence of other people (e.g., “He/she completely ignores you in front of their friends, NOT because of an argument”; “He/she humiliates you in public”). The final domain was *verbal aggression* and included aggressive comments made to their partner (e.g., “He/she swears at you. NOT during an argument”; “He/she threatens to destroy things that are important to you”).

### **Ethical Considerations**

The study was approved after full review by the Department of Psychology University Ethics Committee. Due to the sensitive nature of the questionnaire, the online study was only accessible via an individual link that would inactivate after a single use. This prevented the questionnaire being distributed throughout high-schools and Universities, and prevented it being seen by younger people. Before distribution to students permission was sought from high-school head teachers who previewed the survey.

### **Procedure**

The study was advertised in two high-schools and a single University, via the use of posters. The first author spent a day visiting the high-schools and going into classrooms to provide further information to students, and inviting them to participate in the research during school time.

All questionnaires were administered online to University undergraduates, whilst some high-school students completed a paper version in classrooms when it was not possible for them to use online devices. Participants were first asked to read an information sheet and then sign a consent form before completing the questionnaire. Participation required reading 20 statements of relationship behaviours and then answering a further two questions about each statement, as described in the Materials above. They were given a debrief form upon completion. The questionnaire took approximately 15 minutes to complete.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

The qualitative responses from the open question were given a value of either 1, 2 or 3 based on the numerical classification system for levels of response protectiveness developed by Murphy and Smith (2010). Retaliatory, reciprocating, rewarding or reassuring responses were assigned a value of 1. Passive or vague responses were given a value of 2, and finally answers that involved stating a personal right, requesting change, or leaving the relationship were rated 3. Common phrases used throughout the qualitative responses were used to ensure that responses were coded correctly, for example participants that said they would “walk away”, “forget about it”, “ignore it”, “ask them why” or “wouldn’t care” were coded as 2. Two researchers unrelated to the project were also given a sample of blind responses and asked to code them to ensure that the process was reliable. Since the coding of these responses largely focuses upon how much participants were being protective of themselves and how likely they were to be protected from harm in the future, their responses and subsequent codes are referred to as “response protectiveness” scores.

Paired sample *t*-tests were used to address the first research question and determine whether mean scores for perceived acceptability and response protectiveness significantly varied between domains of warning signs. The *t*-tests were paired because the same participants were used in each domain of warning signs, and all of the same participants were given both an acceptability and response protectiveness score. Pearson *r* correlations were also calculated to address the second research question and ascertain whether there were any correlations between the perceived acceptability of behaviours and the response protectiveness scores for each domain. Factorial ANOVAs were conducted to address the final research question and to investigate the effect of age and gender on perceived acceptability of warning sign behaviours and response protectiveness scores. Effect sizes were calculated and interpreted in accordance with Cohen (1992).

## Results

### Variation in Perceived Acceptability by Warning Sign Domain

The variation in perceived acceptability of behaviours was investigated in order to address the first research question of what adolescents' attitudes towards warning signs are, and to explore the first hypothesis that predicted that adolescents would be relatively unaware of the risks associated with certain warning sign behaviours. Paired sample *t*-tests were conducted to determine whether perceived acceptability and response protectiveness scores varied significantly by domain. Three of these pairings proved to be significant in terms of their perceived acceptability (see Table 2). Relationship behaviours under the personal degradation domain were found to be the least acceptable, being rated significantly higher than all other domains, including denigration,  $t(170) = -5.92, p < .001, d = 0.45$ , public degradation,  $t(170) = -5.61, p < .001, d = 0.40$ , and finally verbal aggression  $t(170) = -6.21, p < .001, d = 0.47$ . The least problematic domain of warning sign behaviours was found to be public degradation, which only significantly differed in perceived acceptability to personal degradation. No other significant differences were found in the perceived acceptability of the warning sign domains.

[Table 2 about here]

### Variation in Response Protectiveness by Warning Sign Domain

Variations in response protectiveness were examined to investigate the second research question of how likely adolescents are to reinforce future abusive behaviours indirectly through their responses to warning signs in each domain. This also tested the second hypothesis that adolescents would respond in a passive manner to warning signs. The differences between individual domains and the domain ranked next highest in response protectiveness were assessed using paired samples *t*-tests. Although the mean responses of participants were passive or vague for all four domains, proposed responses to behaviours

significantly differed for all of the domains. Table 2 above showed that the domain that produced the most troublesome responses (lowest scores) from participants, where they were least protected from encountering further problems in the future, was public degradation. Conversely, the domain that generated the most protective and assertive responses was personal degradation. However, even though three out of six of the pairings differed significantly, differences between only two of the pairings yielded a medium effect size (Cohen, 1992) (see Table 3). The lack of clear effects suggests that only the differences between public and personal degradation, and the differences between denigration and public degradation, have any practical importance in the real world. The remaining pairings may only be significant because of high power and large sample size.

[Table 3 about here]

### **The Relationship between Perceived Acceptability and Response Protectiveness**

To ascertain whether individuals who were aware of unacceptable behaviours still responded in an assertive manner, and to see if there was a relationship between perceived acceptability and response protectiveness, correlations were conducted. Perceived acceptability and response protectiveness scores had medium positive correlations for all four domains, with the strongest correlation found for warning signs in the personal degradation domain (personal degradation,  $r=.44$ ,  $p<.001$ ; denigration,  $r=.39$ ,  $p<.001$ ; verbal aggression,  $r=.32$ ,  $p<.001$ ; public degradation,  $r=.28$ ,  $p<.001$ ). Despite these positive medium-to-large correlations, further analysis revealed that when some behaviours were rated as being completely inappropriate, risk heightening and rewarding/reassuring behaviours were still common. For example, for the item “he/she completely ignores you in front of their friends, NOT because of an argument” in the public degrading domain, 89% of participants rated the behaviour either 4 or 5 and so were aware of the risks and perceived them as unacceptable. However, only 6% of these risk aware individuals proposed assertive responses that were

likely to discourage future behaviours. Conversely, if we take an example from the domain with the strongest correlation e.g., “he/she makes you do degrading things” it was found that 98% of participants were aware of the risks associated with the behaviour but only 45% responded assertively. The remaining 55% proposed passive responses.

### **Further Exploratory Analysis**

**The effects of gender and age on perceived acceptability.** A 2 (Gender, males vs females) \* 4 (Age, 16 vs 17 vs 18 vs 19) fully independent groups factorial ANOVA was conducted on perceived acceptability scores. There was no significant main effect of age,  $F(3,163)=.05, p=.983$  and no significant interaction,  $F(3,163)=.79, p=.503$ . There was however a significant main effect of gender, with females rating statements as more unacceptable ( $M=87.99, SD=6.29$ ) than males ( $M=79.62, SD=8.32$ ), with a large effect size,  $F(1,163)=38.99, p<.001, \eta_p^2=.19$ . These results can be seen in Figure 1, where we see that females of all ages scored behaviours as more unacceptable than males.

[Figure 1 about here]

**The effects of gender and age on response protectiveness.** A 2 (Gender, males vs females) \* 4 (Age, 16 vs 17 vs 18 vs 19) fully independent groups factorial ANOVA was conducted on response protectiveness scores. In line with the results of perceived acceptability scores, there was no significant main effect of age on response protectiveness,  $F(3,163)=1.11, p=.345$  and no significant interaction,  $F(3,163)=2.56, p=.057$ . There was however a significant main effect of gender, with females proposing more assertive responses on average ( $M=2.22, SD=.28$ ) than males ( $M=2.09, SD=.25$ ), with a small effect size,  $F(1,163)=3.95, p=.048, \eta_p^2=.02$ . These results can be seen in Figure 2 which shows that females aged 16, 17 and 18 proposed more protective and assertive responses than males, but this effect was reversed in those aged 19.

[Figure 2 about here]



## **Discussion**

The current study aimed to investigate whether adolescents could recognise warning sign behaviours of emotional abuse in romantic relationships, and respond in a way that would discourage future abusive behaviours. The study also aimed to examine adolescents' attitudes towards warning sign behaviours. These aspects were thought pertinent due to the fact that emotionally abusive behaviours can be the most detrimental to subsequent functioning (Estefn et al., 2016; Kent et al., 1999). Relationships in adolescence can have an important impact on relationships in the future, and those aged 16-19 are the group most likely to fall victim to domestic violence (ONS, 2017), making them the group that should be targeted for early interventions.

## **Review of Findings**

Adolescents were relatively aware of the seriousness of the different warning signs, with behaviours in the 'personal degradation' domain being perceived as the most serious/unacceptable. While not positively reinforcing negative behaviour, both males and females nevertheless tended to propose passive or vague responses to warning signs, with the most assertive responses being proposed for behaviours in the 'personal degradation' domain and the most passive responses for behaviours that involved 'public degrading'. The passive and vague responses could suggest that participants are generally unaware of the ways of responding that can mitigate future abusive behaviours. However, it is also possible that adolescents are uncomfortable responding using these mitigating behaviours perhaps because of uncertainty over how the response would be socially received. Finally, the study investigated the relationship between the perceived acceptability of behaviours and the proposed responses. Participants' attitudes towards the behaviour were positively correlated with their response protectiveness for all four domains, so participants who rated behaviours

as less acceptable tended to propose more assertive responses. The strongest correlation was found for behaviours in the ‘personal degradation’ domain.

The results of the current study were in line with the prediction that adolescents would be likely to respond in a passive manner towards warning sign behaviours. However, the prediction that adolescents would be unaware of the risks associated with behaviours was not fully supported because behaviours in all four domains were, on average, perceived as being ‘unacceptable’ or ‘completely unacceptable’. This was not however reflected in participants’ proposed responses, making it plausible that they are still relatively unaware of the serious consequences such behaviours can have. Our results showed that males perceived behaviours as more acceptable than females. These views may partly be explained by the idea that individuals may be constrained by societal expectations of how they should behave in relationships, with males being more dominant and therefore perceiving certain warning sign behaviours to be more commonplace when elicited by others, including their partners. McCreary and Rhodes (2001) support this inference through their findings that participants perceived dominant and submissive acts as equally desirable for males and females, but submissive acts were perceived to be more stereotypical of females and dominant acts more stereotypical of males. These stereotypes may act as social expectations for how individuals should behave in romantic relationships, constraining how individuals respond to, and perceive, warning signs of abuse.

Our findings are somewhat consistent with those of Murphy and Smith (2010), insofar as in both studies adolescents tended to propose passive or vague responses to warning signs of abuse, even for behaviours that they rated as more serious. The ratings for each domain do differ however. Whereas Murphy and Smith found that verbally aggressive behaviours were perceived to be the most serious, the current study found that they only ranked third out of a possible four. In addition, they found that both verbal aggression and public debasement were

considered significantly more serious than personal putdowns, but the current study found that personal degradation was the domain perceived as the most serious/least acceptable. The non-parametric analyses of both studies are also similar, in that in both samples the majority of adolescents who were aware of the seriousness of warning sign behaviours still responded in a passive or risk heightening manner, and neglected to propose mitigating and assertive responses. The key differences between the current study and Murphy and Smith (2010) are the demographics of the sample. Whereas Murphy and Smith only considered females whose ages ranged from 14-18, the current study also included males and focused on individuals aged 16-19. These differences in gender and age may account for some of the different findings as males and females may differ in what they perceive to be abusive behaviours, with males defining abuse based on the intent of the behaviours, and females defining it based on the impact the behaviour has on the victim (Sears, Byers, Whelan & Saint-Pierre, 2006).

There is a common assumption that men are perpetrators of violence, which in turn can mean that when the same behaviours are displayed by both men and women, the behaviour is likely to be perceived as more serious when elicited by a man. In terms of physical abuse, studies reveal harsher judgements of male perpetrators compared to female perpetrators (Basow, Cahill, Phelan, Longshore, DeLisi, 2007; Hammock, Richardson, Williams & Janit, 2015). These perceptions of physical abuse may be so firmly established that they effect perceptions of emotional abuse and result in harsher judgements of males (Capezza, D'Intino, Flynn, Arriaga, 2017). Capezza et al. (2017) found that participants rated male perpetrators of emotional abuse more harshly than they did female perpetrators. However, ratings were unaffected by the gender of the participants themselves. In the current study, it is possible that since the gender of the hypothetical perpetrator was not specified, when males imagined the hypothetical situation their perpetrator was generally female, whilst the females generally

imagined a male perpetrator. This leniency toward female perpetration could account for why males perceived behaviours as more acceptable than females. However this does not take into account same-sex relationships, therefore it is possible that some males imagined a male perpetrator and some females envisioned a female perpetrator.

The current study found that, compared to males, females both rated warning sign behaviours as less acceptable, and proposed the most assertive responses, suggesting that they are more aware of how to respond appropriately to warning signs. This contradicts Jackson, Cram and Seymour (2000) who found that girls are more likely than boys to continue in abusive relationships, being less assertive to their own rights and boundaries. The finding that females rated warning signs as less acceptable is interesting in light of previous studies reporting that more females than males instigate emotional abuse (Barter et al., 2009; Foshee, 1996; Karakurt & Silver, 2013). This raises the question of why females are more likely to instigate abusive behaviours if they are well aware of the seriousness of their actions. An answer may be provided in what motivates males and females to use such behaviours. Females tend to act aggressively in retaliation or self-defence, whereas males may do so in order to be playful or controlling (Hird, 2000; Jackson, 1999).

The suggestion through the qualitative responses of participants is that they are generally unaware of what constitutes unacceptable behaviour and seem less able to distinguish between what they refer to as “joking” and comments said in spite. The most common explanation for this in the current study was because they thought behaviours “depend on the context” in which they occur. Some responses even went as far as to say that their partner could be trying to “help” them when they insult their intelligence and appearance, and so participants were thankful for the disparaging feedback. Many participants proposed that they would “ask why” their partner behaved in a certain way but proposed no further action, or would “ask them to stop” their behaviour and state their personal rights, but would then

follow up with a threat to “do the same thing to them”. There were however many incidences when participants said they would simply “break up” with or “walk away” from their partners, but very rarely did participants propose telling their family or friends about the threatening behaviour. Past research has found that when adolescents do disclose experience of dating violence, they do so to friends rather than parents or adults (Molidor & Tolman, 1998). Indeed, the ONS (2016) reports that compared to women aged over 25, those aged 16-24 are less likely to tell individuals in a position of authority or individuals from support organisations about their experiences. These responses indicate that adolescents are somewhat aware that the warning sign behaviours are unacceptable, but they have trouble recognising the warning signs without context, and lack appropriate knowledge of how to respond to these behaviours.

One of the reasons it may be difficult for adolescents to recognise warning signs of emotional abuse, and an explanation for why verbal aggression was perceived to be more acceptable in the current study, is because much of the language used now, that is considered normal or acceptable, can in fact be abusive (Munro, 2001; Pelacios Martínez, 2011). Pelacios Martínez (2011) found that the language of British teenagers is characterised by the common use of abuse and insults, and that these words are often used as expressions of comradeship (e.g., ‘you d\*ck’). Perhaps adolescents are so familiar with this language that they no longer think there is anything wrong with it. This idea is supported by Sears et al. (2006) who, in a qualitative study examining adolescents’ experience of different forms of abuse in dating relationships, found that participants only identify certain behaviours as abusive in particular contexts. For example, Sears et al.’s (2006) participants considered verbal jealousy only abusive if there is also a threat of physical harm, but not when they perceive their partner to be joking around. These findings are also consistent with the current study, in that participants tended to think that each of the behaviours required more context.

Whether individuals would indeed respond differently if given more context about the situations in which the warning signs occurred is a question worthy of future research.

Other findings within the current study are also consistent with previous research. Few and Rosen (2005) report that warning sign behaviours are generally regarded as innocuous or reciprocated, and the same is true in the current study. Adolescents' did not perceive many of the behaviours to be harmful and intended in a threatening manner, and when they did perceive this, many of the qualitative responses proposed retaliatory action.

### **Limitations**

Our results must be considered in light of the study's limitations, including our use of a volunteer sample. Adolescents with an interest in relationships and the motivation to complete a task in their own time may not be representative of the entire age-group. Perhaps this sub-population is more socially restrained in their responses to emotional abuse. Although it is hard to imagine less motivated adolescents having better response protectiveness, we must consider that our results might be shaped by our sample.

Another constraint on our results surrounds the complexity of emotional abuse. The vast amount of behaviours that can constitute emotional abuse makes it very difficult to generate an adequate questionnaire that encompasses everything it needs to, including abusive behaviour specifically and not general behaviour. For example, a review of studies from English speaking industrialised countries found that the prevalence rates of emotional partner abuse averaged at around 80% (Carney & Barney, 2012). With prevalence rates this high it raises the question of whether studies around emotional abuse are actually measuring abuse specifically, or measuring general behaviour that includes hurt feelings and anger.

The procedure for classifying the protectiveness of participants' proposed responses is a third potential limitation. The procedure adopted was the same as that used by Murphy and Smith (2010) which makes the assumption that communicating assertively and clearly, or

leaving a relationship, are the most protective responses to all warning signs. All other behaviours were assumed not to be protective, but further research is needed to test these assumptions. Similarly, the assumption was made that assertive behaviour is the only kind that is capable of discouraging future abuse, when this may not be the case. Individuals may respond passively as a way of mitigating the situation as it occurs. However, the aim of this study was to investigate adolescents' responses to warning sign behaviours and so it is unlikely that passive behaviours to the first warning signs of emotionally abusive behaviour will continue to mitigate the situation, and prevent future exposure and the escalation of abuse.

The main methodological limitation of the study is that only hypothetical responses to behaviours were investigated, rather than actual or past experiences. It is therefore difficult to know whether individuals would actually respond in the same way during real life situations, or if their hypothetical responses were just how they would hope to respond in an ideal situation. However, since these 'ideal' responses proposed by participants were somewhat inadequate for preventing abuse, the hypothetical situations may have been an appropriate method of consistent and reliable assessment.

### **Implications**

Given that warning signs of emotional abuse can lead to severe victimisation (Follingstad et al., 2002; Molidor, 1995; O'Leary & Smith-Slep, 2003) the relationship between perceived acceptability and response protectiveness found in the current study is sobering. It highlights the importance of introducing effective interventions for adolescents so that they are aware of how to respond before they slip too far down the hypothetical slippery slope proposed by Murphy (2012). Education of young people surrounding issues of emotional abuse is lacking, but with research such as the current study, we hope to highlight the importance of early interventions. In 2016, the UK government proposed a strategy to end domestic violence by

launching campaigns to raise awareness, through including issues of domestic abuse in compulsory Personal Social and Health Education (PSHE) lessons in school (Home Office, 2016). Campaigns such as this represent an important first step in tackling issues of domestic and emotional abuse.

Perhaps the major implication of the current study is that simply telling adolescents that behaviours are unacceptable is not enough to reduce their vulnerability. They need to also be taught how to respond appropriately and assertively to warning signs of emotional abuse. Interventions that merely focus on informing people about what constitutes abuse are limited in their usefulness. Instead, interventions should provide practical help and skills. These programmes would be similar to the social influence approach used to prevent other adolescent problem behaviours, such as drug use (Sanci et al., 2002). This approach argues that young people need to be introduced to alternative behaviours, and be well practiced in applying them, as well as rehearsing alternative responses to common scenarios to help stop them succumbing to social pressures. To that end we are supporting the schools that collaborated in the current study. The effectiveness of the social influence approach and life skills training for reducing adolescents' acceptance of emotionally abusive behaviours is worth future research investigation.

### **Conclusions**

In the context of local national high rates of young adult dating violence, the current study found that UK adolescents aged 16-19 are generally aware of what warning sign behaviours of emotional abuse are unacceptable in romantic relationships, but lack the appropriate responses to such behaviours. Females appear to respond in a more assertive manner to warning signs, and it may be possible for future research to investigate whether the same patterns emerge for different types of relationships including siblings, parent-child etc.. Practical training for adolescents in ways to respond appropriately to warning signs in a non-



aggressive assertive manner, as well as ways to assert their own personal rights and boundaries may be critical components to intervention programmes. The current study offers an important contribution in ascertaining how emotionally abusive relationships become abusive, rather than how they are abusive. It also provides an impetus for future research surrounding the role of the victim's responses in the emergence of emotional abuse.

## Notes

1. The questionnaire is available from the authors on request.

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## Tables

Table 1

### *Participant Demographics Split by Age*

	Age				Total
	16	17	18	19	
N	42	64	44	21	171
Male, <i>n</i> (%)	12 (28.6)	14 (21.9)	7 (15.9)	5 (23.8)	38
Female, <i>n</i> (%)	30 (71.4)	50 (78.1)	37 (84.1)	16 (76.2)	133
Currently in a relationship, <i>n</i> (%)	12 (28.6)	31 (48.4)	23(52.3)	4 (19.0)	70
Ever in a relationship, <i>n</i> (%)	31 (73.8)	46 (71.9)	34 (77.3)	15 (71.4)	126

Table 2

### *Descriptive Statistics for Acceptability and Response Protectiveness Scores for Each Warning Sign Domain*

Domain	Perceived Acceptability (score range 1-5)		Response Protectiveness (score range 1-3)	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Personal degradation	4.42 <sup>abc</sup>	.45	2.26*	.33
Denigration	4.25 <sup>a</sup>	.44	2.21*	.33
Verbal aggression	4.23 <sup>b</sup>	.42	2.15**	.38
Public degradation	4.22 <sup>c</sup>	.57	2.05	.38

*Note.* Higher perceived acceptability scores denote that the behaviour was seen as less acceptable. Higher response protectiveness scores denote that the response was more assertive. Superscript denotes that pairs differed significantly in their perceived acceptability at the  $p < .001$  significance level.

\*This domain's response protectiveness score is significantly higher than the score of the domain scored next lower, at  $p < .05$ .

\*\*This domain's response protectiveness score is significantly higher than the score of the domain scored next lower, at  $p < .01$ .



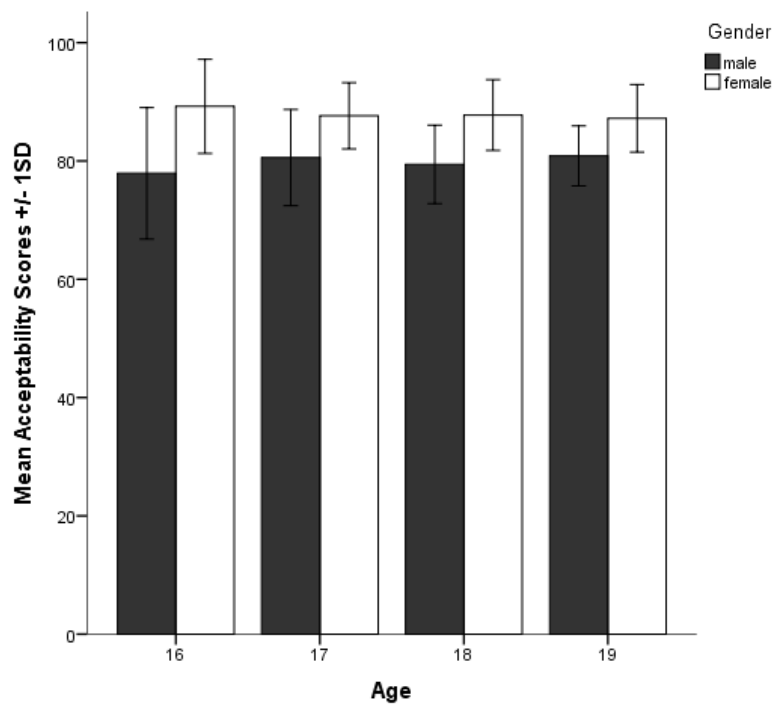
Table 3

*The Effect of Warning Sign Domains on Response Protectiveness Scores*

Paired Sample	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
Public Degradation/Personal Degradation	.21	.37	7.37	<b>&lt;.001</b>	0.56
Denigration/Public Degradation	.16	.34	6.03	<b>&lt;.001</b>	0.46
Verbal Aggression/Personal Degradation	.11	.37	3.85	<b>.001</b>	0.29
Verbal Aggression/Public Degradation	.10	.40	3.11	.013	0.24
Denigration/ Verbal Aggression	.06	.37	2.12	.169	0.17
Denigration/ Personal Degradation	.05	.31	2.00	.231	0.14

*Note.* Bold type denotes statistically significant differences after Bonferroni correction ( $\alpha=.008$ ).

## Figures



*Figure 1.* Mean acceptability scores as a function of age and gender.

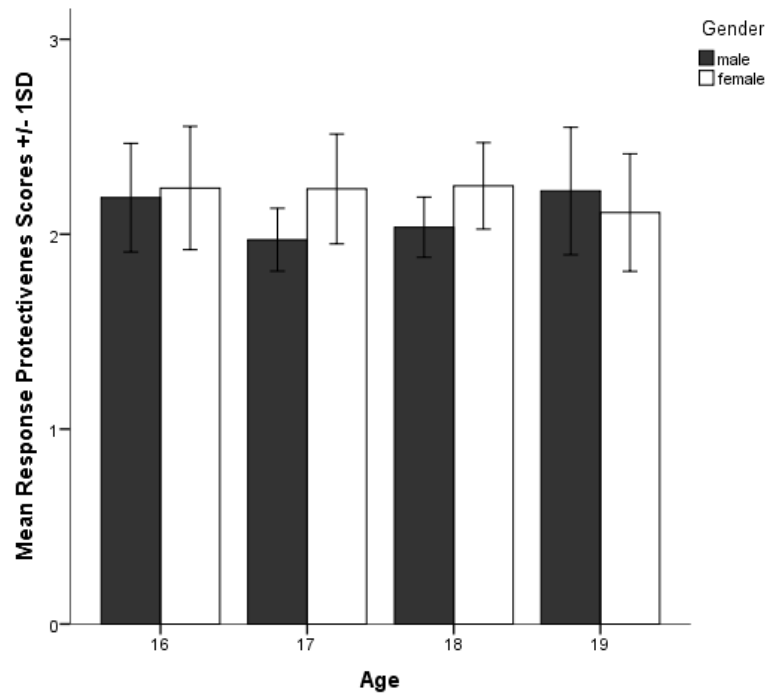


Figure 2. Mean response protectiveness scores as a function of age and gender

### Author Biographies

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Dominic A. S. Pearson, PhD, is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Portsmouth, UK. He is a chartered and registered Forensic Psychologist with extensive experience of working with the prison and probation services. His research focuses mainly on evaluation of rehabilitation programmes for offenders or service-users. He is interested in bridging the research-practice gulf by supporting and evaluating evidence-informed initiatives in applied settings.